

AS A DOCTOR IN THERESIENSTADT

Before 1943 I had never heard the name of the Czech town of Terezin. How it came about that I was sent there is a story that goes back to 1942, the time I left Berlin.

Unlike other persecuted persons, I was neither taken away by the Gestapo nor did I get one of those dreaded letters saying I should report at such and such a time at that and that place in Berlin.

At the end of April 1942, I received a letter ordering me to report to the Health Department in Posen (Poznan) within 3 days. Thereupon I went to the Police Headquarters in Berlin where the letter came from and asked what the meaning of it was. I was told I was to look after part of the civilian population in the "General--Government". I could keep my flat in Berlin, could return there after a few months and resume my practice. I would receive a fixed salary to be paid into my bank account from which I would be permitted to draw as I liked. As will be seen, I did make use of this possibility at a later stage.

My friends congratulated me. They thought I was lucky to be relieved of the fear of deportation to the East, the nightmare of all the Jews.

I just had time to have an inoculation against typhus fever. Such inoculations were forbidden for Jews but a colleague of mine did it "illegally."

I was given a train ticket to Posen and could pick a train and departure time for myself.

After the war I tried in vain to learn of similar cases and to find out the reason for this "preferential treatment."

It was in March 1942 while I was still working as a "medical practitioner for Jews only" - when to my horror, a high ranking SS officer called at my surgery. He said he did not come officially but wanted to ask me a favour: He had a Jewish girl friend who was to be deported to the East soon. Couldn't I write a medical certificate stating that she was too ill to join the transport? Although I was understandably taken aback, I told him to send the girl to my surgery. We then chatted quite a while. He told me that recently he had taken part in a conference on Lake Wamsee where a decision had been made to take severe measures against the Jews immediately. I looked at him terror-stricken but he assured me nothing would happen to me. As arranged, the girl came a few days later. Of course, she spoke well of her friend saying that he was basically a decent fellow. In spite of the risk I took by doing so I wrote the desired certificate, which proved to be successful; the girl was taken off the list of the transport in question. What happened to her later I do not know since I had to leave Berlin myself soon afterwards.

Perhaps it is naive to assume that this man in fact show his gratitude by putting in a good word for me at the right place. However nothing was impossible in those days. So I packed a small suitcase with summer dresses etc. It was May and I was supposed to return in a few months' time. I travelled to Posen together with civilian passengers and soldiers as an ordinary III class passenger. It never occurred to me that this was the end of my freedom until 1945....

Although I was wearing the Star of David, my fellow-passengers were polite to me, even offering me a seat. On arrival in Posen, I went to the Health Department in the Town Hall. The superintendent of Medical Affairs told me that the German population was to be protected from a typhoid epidemic spreading from the Polish labour camps. I should start my work at a quarantine camp for women, Fort Radziwill, which was hermetically sealed from the outside world.

Terrible conditions prevailed in this camp and the lack of food and medicine increased the mortality rate greatly. The camp was closed 6 weeks later and the survivors were transported to the labour camp Antoninek, formerly the mansion of an aristocratic Polish family. As this was not big enough to accommodate the girls (about 300), they had to build huts, with bricks handmade by themselves.

My work place was in Antoninek but I was allowed to move freely. As I also had to look after a man's labour camp some distance away, I was given a bicycle for this purpose. This also gave me the opportunity to buy medicine for my girls. Here my bank account proved handy. I must have looked very strange wearing the Star of David riding a swastika-decorated bicycle, I notice the surprised looks of by-standers. This comparative freedom encouraged me to try to improve the conditions in the camp. Food was far from satisfactory. Every day girls collapsed and died from starvation and I had to issue the death certificates. I was supposed to write heart attack or tuberculosis as the cause of death. Instead, with the consent of my senior surgeon who was a former member of the former German National Party and certainly not a Nazi - I wrote the real cause of death i.e. undernourishment. In addition I put in an application for improving the camp conditions especially for better and more food. The girls were used for road building, very strenuous work. At that time one did not yet realise that the "Final Solution" was to be carried out. One still thought the Jews were merely to be exploited for labour and had therefore to be fed accordingly.

Strangely enough, my application was successful and the conditions improved considerably. The girls were overjoyed and thankful.

Unfortunately, the improvement did not last long. About the middle of 1943 I was arrested and taken to the Gestapo Prison of Posen. I had hardly time to pack my suitcase and say farewell to

to my girls. It was a sad leave-taking. The girls helped me to to hide a small amount of money in my luggage which proved to be very useful later on my arrival in Terezin. I have never seen the girls again....

In the prison I was told by an SS official I would be "annihilated." I was kept there for about 6 weeks and was then handed over to the law court, Berlin Alexanderplatz to whose jurisdiction my residence in Berlin belonged. It may seem strange that in this case official legal proceedings were observed with a Jewess but the ways of the Gestapo were not always logical. I was accused of "Sabotage of German Labour."

In the Alexanderplatz prison I remained only one day. Without having been interrogated I was transported in a "Black Maria" to the women's prison of the Gestapo in the Besserner Strasse. Here there were not only political prisoners but also ordinary criminals and inmates of other concentration camps who were to be sent to other camps because of over-crowding. One of the women in my cell was accused of having helped a British prisoner of war to escape. I had to wait several weeks for my interrogation. One Sunday, I was called by the supervisor of the prison. A co-prisoner, an Ukranian girl, was in labour and the doctor in charge was not available. The supervisor had done a course in mid-wifery but she was not willing to take the responsibility. I asked for clean linen scissors, needle and twine to bind and cut the navel cord. It was an easy delivery and I got half a loaf of bread as my "fee." I shared it with my cell mates. They wished for more deliveries of that kind.

One after the other was called for interrogation and most of them did not come back. At last it was my turn. But there was no record of my case. The files appeared to have been lost. The examining official asked me what I had done. "The death certificates were not written according to the rule" I answered. The official did not ask any more questions and said I could go. Naively I asked could I go home to my flat. Later I learnt that my flat had been bombed by this time. "No, you cannot go home," he said "but we shall send you again to your girls," and smiled maliciously.

Only after the war I found out that the camp Antoninek had been closed soon after my "departure" and all girls were sent to Auschwitz and gassed. Thus, because of my "sabotage" I am the only survivor of Antoninek.

Again per Black Maria I was taken to a collection centre, situated in a school at Grosse Hamburger Strasse. There were three floors in this building, the offices and a few

rooms for inmates whose destination had not been decided yet were at street level, on the top floor there were those destined for Auschwitz, on the middle floor those for Terezin. I did not yet know the difference between those two camps. Having been cut off from the outside world during my stay in Posen I had no idea what these names meant. What happened now was one of those many strokes of luck to which I owe my survival. In this school I met former patients of mine who recognised me at once. This couple told me they had succeeded in bribing the Gestapo to let them emigrate to Sweden. They would leave Berlin in a few days and this school building this very day. When I told them I was to be sent to Auschwitz they were horrified and said that must never happen. Had I any money available? Perhaps they could do something for me by using their connections. Sweden would not be possible but perhaps one could try to have me re-directed to T. They knew a Jewish lawyer, Dr. J. who had good connections within the Gestapo. I gave them the address of my sister who lived in Berlin, married to a so-called Aryan. They promised to get in touch with her as soon as they were home. Time was running out. The transports were to leave within the next 24 hours, first T. at 4 a.m., Auschwitz 2 hours later. My luggage had already been collected to be sent to Auschwitz: the suitcase containing my few belongings including my diary which I had kept in Posen. Even today I miss those notes which did not only contain the names of all the girls, but also songs the girls used to sing.

Now only did I realise the difference between T and Auschwitz. In this school building it was common knowledge. Several people who were to be deported to Auschwitz jumped out of the window - others took poison. I, too, had a capsule of cyanide with me, ready to be taken at any time. T on the other hand was considered to be a camp with preferential treatment.

I waited all day long for the visit of Dr. J. which had been promised to me. I had already abandoned all hope when he arrived late in the evening, a few hours before the transport left.

Dr. J. asked me a few questions and suggested he would talk to a high ranking Gestapo official. I was to come along with him but should leave the answers to him. We went into an office, where the following conversation took place: The Gestapo office: "Are you married and have you children?" Dr. J. "Widow, no children, the husband died of wounds received in the war. He had been decorated with the Iron Cross I and II. The Gestapo: "How many are to go to T.?" Dr. J. : "59 persons" the Gestapo: "All right. We shall make it a round figure, sixty!"

Thus my fate was decided. I moved down to the floor for T. and was saved from Auschwitz.

The transport to T. consisted mainly of doctors and nurses of the Jewish Hospital of Berlin which had been closed. Contrary to the dreaded transports in cattle wagons, we travelled in ordinary III class carriages. Thus I had arrived in T. on my Holocaust Odyssey.

MY EXPERIENCES IN TEREZIN

Every newcomer - whatever his or her previous occupation - had to join a so called Hundertschaft, a group of a hundred people, one of the terms of the Gestapo's vocabulary. We were made to work ten hours seven days a week. I was ordered to dig potatoes and later to stack boards in a timberyard -both activities outside the camp but under the Gestapo's supervision. This had its advantages because one could steal a few potatoes or pieces of wood for heating or for barter. However one took the risk of severe punishment when caught. Theft was a severe crime. One was sent to the "Kleine Festung" (Small Fortress) tantamount to a death sentence.

During my work in the Hundertschaft I was lodged in a mass quarter for women, an attic with broken windows. At night it became pretty cold and I possessed neither a blanket nor warm clothing. As I mentioned before, my luggage had been sent to Auschwitz. It was imperative for me to "buy" a blanket in exchange for half a loaf of bread. What that means nobody can realise who has never been in such a position. My only pair of slacks - I had worn them in prison day and night - was completely threadbare. There was a chance to get some clothing in the so-called "Kleider-Kammer" (clothing store) where belongings of people who had died or had been deported were issued. However, this was by no means easy. The distribution of garments was a job eagerly sought after and therefore reserved for the Czechs. Everything depended on whether the applicant made a favourable impression on the issuer. Being German, I was advised to "prettify" myself: I should put on lipstick which in turn had to be "bought" by barter, but the investment was worth it.

One should not imagine that living together in such a mass quarter was harmonious. The hopeless situation made the inmates desparate, even aggressive. A great deal of diplomacy was needed to quieten down the exasperated inmates. Nevertheless, even in this hopeless situation there were occasionally humorous moments. I remember once when on top of all the noise a young girl was singing "In diesen heil'gen Hallen kermt man die Rache nicht" (Within these hallowed walls revenge is not known."

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When I had finished my time in the Hundertschaft, where I worked about three months, I was directed to medical work. I was then given quarters in a medium sized room where already 5 Czech women were living. There were no broken windows but nearly the whole room was taken up by five beds. I was told to sleep on the floor and should roll up my blanket in daytime.

My room mates were well able to speak German but talked to each other in Czech. I felt their hostility towards me who spoke Hitler's language. They held me responsible for the Nazis. Fortunately there was one exception. A colleague from Prague, Dr. Anna Krasa offered to share her bed with me. She was the only one who was friendly towards me. We had many interests in common. She was very musical, a good pianist. I still remember to what lengths she went to get the use of a piano for practising. There were only a few instruments in the camp. So Anna had to play early in the morning, say from 5 - 6. The previous evening she would take the music to bed and hum the tunes to herself. Unfortunately Anna was deported to the East in 1944 and I never saw her again. Before she left she gave me the address of her friend Ninon in Switzerland wife of the well known writer Hermann Hesse. Both took care of me later when I had arrived in Switzerland.

Anna and I were allocated to different sections. She was an Ear Nose and Throat Specialist and worked in an ambulance, whereas I had to look after the "Genrekaserne" a former Engineers' barracks. This building was used as an old age hospital for women.

Unfortunately not much could be done for those poor patients. In the large sick rooms there were many sufferers of Tuberculosis. I tried to separate the infected ones from the others. There was a laboratory where the sputum could be examined. Here - amongst others - worked Dr. Adler, wife of H.G. Adler who later wrote the most important book on Terezin. Both Adlers were sent to Auschwitz in 1944. H.G. Adler survived but not his wife.

There was hardly any medicine available and food was, if possible, less for the bedridden patients than for the working inmates. Deaths occurred daily. We did not register them until one or two days later so that the living could benefit from the meagre food rations of the deceased.

One of my patients was the sister of Rabbi Baeck. Unfortunately she died in the early days of my work in the Genrekaserne. Her daughter, Nelly Stern, was also a doctor and worked in the same building as I. We shared the duty in the sick rooms and helped each other. I liked her from the beginning and we became good friends. Nelly introduced me to the discussion evenings of her uncle, Rabbi Baeck. These meetings were held from time to time and usually 6-8 people were invited.

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Each of them could choose a subject to lecture on. Rabbi Baeck conducted the discussion which followed. One could prepare oneself with the help of the library which was quite good. Rabbi Baeck would offer his final comments on the discussion. These used to be the highlight of the evening. He was so well-versed in all areas of science, art and politics that we were all quite enthusiastic about these evenings which belonged to the few bright spots in T.

There were also concerts and operas. A book has been written on the unforgettable performance of Verdi's *Requiem*, the performers of which were sent to Auschwitz to be gassed soon afterwards.

One of my deepest impressions was the children's choir from Carmen. The day after the performance we saw the children marching gaily to the station to be transported to Auschwitz. They were looking forward to the railway trip and sang their chorus while marching not knowing it was their last song.

My activities were not restricted to medical matters. Every few weeks we women physicians were ordered to clean the rooms and office of Eichmann. On his occasional visits to T. he used these quarters which had to be kept meticulously clean. It was a piquancy of the camp regulations that this service had to be carried out by women doctors only.

I did not see Eichman on these occasions but I met him once at the Railway Ramp when a transport from Hungary arrived. It was my duty to find out how many had died in the cattle wagons. Alas, it was a considerable number! Eichmann addressed me and asked "How many?" I reported the number and he said, "Good!" Fortunately this was the only occasion when Eichmann spoke to me. The less one was noticed the better. My patients were glad to have a little chat with me. The topic was usually the past and their family. Not surprisingly they were full of praise about their children. One never knew where the truth ended and fantasy began.

There was e.g. the mother of Kain, the co-discoverer of Penicillin. He had emigrated to England and called himself Chain. She told me how happy she was to know him to be in Oxford.

In February 1945 - after my liberation - I had the opportunity to listen to his lecture on Penicillin in Zurich. Someone must have told him that a woman doctor from T. was in the audience. He called me after the lecture and wanted to know all about his mother who at that time was still in T. - and the conditions there. This he considered more important than a discussion with other scientists who stood by waiting for a word with him.

Back in T. the sick rooms were not heated and full of vermin.

Occasionally the poor old ladies were to be transferred to still colder rooms so that the vermin in the usual sickrooms could be exterminated. The patients protested so strongly against any transfer that one had to give in and abandon the whole disinfection.

Taking turns with Nelly Stern I was also on night duty in an ambulance of the Genrekaserne. We treated accidents, even broken bones as efficiently as possible with the few disinfectants and instruments available.

Thus life went on in T., calm on the surface but always shaded by the fear of deportation. We were fairly informed on the events of the war as we had some hidden radio receivers in the camp and we knew that the end was not far off. In spite of this the constant fear continued.

We were told that transports to the East had ceased in October 1944 - but who believed that? There were also new reasons to be deeply worried: We saw the erection of windowless buildings. The explanation given was that these were to be sheds for burning obsolete files and papers. However we realised that these were gas chambers under construction.

It was a miracle that most of us could stand up to this mental strain in the long run. In fact, suicides never stopped even after the transports to the East had ceased. It was strictly forbidden to take one's own life. As this was considered to be a preferential camp, everybody was supposed to be happy. It may seem strange and illogical that one was not allowed to kill oneself as the "final solution" was being planned.

If any of the unfortunate ones did not succeed in carrying through his intentions, not only he but also his relatives were sent to the "Kleine Festnug," as liability extended to all kinsmen and women. This meant a slow and painful death.

We physicians tried to dissuade the unfortunate people from committing suicide - if it was only for the very reason that each transport had to consist of a fixed number of deportees. The ones who did not turn up had to be replaced by others. There was always a reserve list prepared for this purpose.

If a suicide was successful we tried to hide the real fact and substitute another cause of death, so that at least the life of the family would be saved. But even in such cases one had to be careful. Unfortunately, there were spies among the inmates who might report the true facts to the Gestapo.

One of the most horrifying impressions was the transport of the psychiatric patients where I also had to be present. These unfortunate ones did not understand the situation

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but they were greatly disturbed when torn from their usual surroundings. They had to be treated with strong sedatives and many had to be carried into the wagons.

Equally heart-rending was the departure of cripples. Those with amputated limbs and cases of poliomyelitis. This disease spread easily because of lack of hygiene. The patients were mostly young people. Those who were able to walk were hurried on, the others were carried on stretchers

These are my impressions of T. as I can remember them now after 37 years....

[Readers who are seeking more information on T. should read H.G. Adlers "Theresienstadt". Edition Moore.]